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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS IOANNINA, REAFFIRMS CLOSE TIES TO U.S.

1. (U) SUMMARY: In a full day of meetings with a range of political, diplomatic, community, and NGO leaders in the northwestern Epirus regional capital of Ioannina on October 14, Ambassador emphasized U.S. interest in the region, possibilities for economic development, progress for religious and ethnic minority groups, and improvement in the trafficking in persons (TIP) situation. Local leaders raised the Macedonia name issue, a range of issues with neighboring Albania, and the close historical ties between the region and the U.S. Broad local media coverage of the visit was uniformly positive. END SUMMARY.

Prefect Focuses on Macedonia Name Issue

2. (U) During Ambassador's introductory meeting with Alexandros Kahrmanis, the Regional Prefect of Epirus, the Prefect gave a brief history of the region, noting the importance of the University of Ioannina and its 12,000 students. A Vlach-speaker himself, Kahrmanis described the Vlach-speaking people in Epirus (a linguistic minority descended from Roman populations in the Balkans) as an "integral part of Hellenism," but not as a minority per se. This segued into a monologue on the Macedonia name issue, where he opined that the neighboring country should get a complex new name that shows it is a new state, and that the most recent Nimetz proposal is a mistake that would cause "permanent problems." Ambassador agreed with the Prefect that the U.S. also wants a solution that both sides consider fair, and that would allow the development of friendly relations. Kahrmanis described relations with Albania, which shares the largest section of the border in Epirus, as "good," but cited criminal activity and illegal immigration as ongoing challenges. He suggested that an electronic border crossing card for Albanians might reduce problems with visa irregularities.

Mayor Discusses Close U.S.- Greece Ties

3. (U) Nikolaos Gontas, the Mayor of the regional capital of Ioannina, focused on positive U.S.-Greece relations and the vital role the U.S. played by "saving" the thousands of Epirots who immigrated to the U.S. after WWII. Based on his recent visit to numerous expatriate communities in the U.S., the Mayor said Epirot-Americans believe the U.S. is the only country where Greek immigrants were treated as equals and given every opportunity to succeed. The Mayor described efforts to help economically develop neighboring Albania, calling improved economic relations "a bridge to improved political relations." Finally, he described efforts to establish an international university in the city to attract students from the Balkans and Europe. Ambassador and Gontas discussed regional economic and tourist development.

Jewish Community Small but Strong

4. (U) In his friendly meeting with Ambassador, Dr. Moses Ellisaf, a medical doctor, University professor and head of the Jewish Community of Ioannina, described the long history of the Greek-speaking Jews in Ioannina. Numbering as many as 4000 members in the 1900s, the community now has just 51 members. Dr. Ellisaf said the climate toward Jews in Ioannina has improved recently, and attributed fewer anti-Semitic incidents during the past two years to increased education efforts and the calmer situation in the Middle East, which he said has a direct relationship to local anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. (Note: The community's monuments were desecrated three times in 2003, but there have been no incidents since then. End note.) Ellisaf mentioned that the large Jewish-Epirot population that immigrated to the U.S. still supports the community. Although Ioannina's synagogue, the largest in Greece, only holds services on High Holy days, there is an active "Synagogue of Ioannina" in Queens, NY. Ambassador mentioned that he always visits Jewish Community representatives on regional trips, who provide a good indication of the general tolerance of a community.

Anti-TIP NGO Looking for More GoG Action

5. (U) Ambassador visited the offices and shelter of the local anti-TIP NGO in Ioannina, Center for the Research and Support for Victims of Maltreatment and Social Exclusion (CVME or "Ekythka" in Greek). Its director, Anda Koublomati

(an IV Candidate for 2005), described recent TIP trends, including the scarcity of identified victims in her region, and victims being married by traffickers to Greek citizens, then entering Greece legally based on this documentation. Koublomati said that Greek public awareness campaigns had not been effective yet, because they were not systematic or consistent. Ambassador visited CVME's refurbished 11-bed shelter, which was bequeathed to the University of Ioannina by a local resident and offered gratis to the NGO. Though somewhat critical of government progress on coordination, victim identification, and legal support, Koublomati said she has excellent cooperation with the authorities. Unlike most Athens anti-TIP NGOs who seek funding from the MFA, CVME also receives local support, likely resulting in their better relations with the GoG. She also described CVME's work at orphanages in Georgia in an effort to prevent trafficking of Georgian children. (Note: There is a large Greek diaspora in Georgia.)

Albanian CG satisfied with Level of GoG Cooperation

16. (U) The Albanian Consul General in Ioannina, Daut Goumeni, explained that the biggest problem of the estimated 50,000 to 60,000 Albanian immigrants in Epirus and Kozani is underemployment, but said integration of Albanians was slowly improving. Goumeni was cautious in his remarks, reflecting his uncertainty as to whether the new Albanian government will keep him in his position. Regarding trafficking of children, Goumeni remarked that the will exists to combat the problem, but greater inter-governmental coordination is needed. Goumeni knew of no children trafficked into his region of responsibility, surmising that any trafficked children may go to larger cities. Goumeni believed that the reduction in child-trafficking may be due to changes in Albanian law made two years ago which he said prevents children from leaving Albania without a passport. This, he continued, has limited the ability of traffickers to easily forge simple travel documents. Regarding immigration, the CG said he has good cooperation with police and receives valuable information on illegal immigrants crossing into Greece.

Media Gives Positive Blanket Coverage

17. (U) Ambassador's visit to Ioannina, covered prominently with numerous photographs in five local newspapers and by local television channels, was described as warm and positive in all media. Local press reported factually on the visit, commenting on Ambassador's interest in economic and tourism development of the region. Ambassador was quoted describing Ioannina as "an impressive town with natural beauty and warm, hospitable people." Several papers reported that the Mayor described the strong ties that exist because of the thousands of immigrants from Ioannina accommodated in the U.S. "This hospitality is the bridge between Ioannina and American communities, and now I have the opportunity to offer warm thanks for the possibilities which were given to our compatriots," Gontas was quoted as saying.

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